Tone & Face screenshots

> **"** Ignoring the need to use an appropriate tone could result in a message that sounds aggressive, tactless, curt, sarcastic or offensive. This will not meet your desired objectives.
>
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Understanding "Tone" in communication

Think of **tone** as the **feeling or attitude** your words carry. It's like the music behind your message – even if the words are the same, the way you say or write them changes everything. Tone shows:

- What you think and feel about your **topic**.

- What you think and feel about your **audience**.

- Your **personality and attitude** at the time.

In **business communication**, aim for a **positive tone**. This is because you want to show yourself and your organisation in a good light. But always be genuine – don't sound fake or overly keen.

For **academic communication**, the goal is usually an **objective tone**. This means your writing should be unbiased, fair, and based on facts and evidence, not personal feelings. Being objective doesn't mean being boring! You still want your writing to be clear and engaging.

This module focuses on the **third type of meaning** in all communication: **our relationship with the audience**. By understanding "tone" and "face-work," you'll learn how to build stronger, more positive connections.

Check your understanding of Tone by taking the following quiz.

1. You are writing a marketing email to promote a new product. Which **tone** should you generally use to best achieve your goal of attracting customers?

Neutral and factual

✔ Enthusiastic and positive

Correct! Marketing communication aims to convey a positive image and excite potential customers about the product, making an enthusiastic and positive tone most effective.

Very formal and polite

⭐ 1/1

2. You are providing feedback to a team member on a sensitive issue. Which **tone** is most appropriate to ensure they receive the feedback constructively?

> Reserved or hesitant

> ✔ Helpful and supportive
>
> > **Correct!** For sensitive feedback, a tone that shows support and focuses on improvement helps the team member receive the message positively and encourages them to act on it without feeling attacked.

> Direct and firm

⭐ 1/1

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Understanding "Face" in communication

In communication, "face" is about how we present ourselves and how we respect others' self-image and independence. There are two main types:

1. Positive Face

Positive face is our desire to be liked, approved of, and seen as capable. It's about our **self-esteem**.

Our communication can either support or challenge this desire. When our words or actions go against someone's need to feel valued, we **threaten their positive face**. This happens when our message makes them feel disliked, undervalued, or criticised. For example, if we:

- Show dislike or disapproval.
- Say or imply they're wrong.
- Ignore their feelings (e.g., put them down, boast).
- Use inappropriate greetings.

Just as we can threaten others' positive face, our own communication can also make *us* look less capable or in control, thus **threatening our own positive face**. This happens if we:

- Show we've made a mistake (e.g., by displaying uncontrolled emotions, apologising too much).

2. Negative Face

Negative face is our desire to be free, independent, and not pressured. It's about our **freedom to act**.

Our communication can sometimes put pressure on others or limit their choices, thereby **threatening their negative face**. For example, this happens if we use:

- Orders or strong requests.
- Strong negative emotions that obligate them.
- Offers or promises (they might feel pressured to accept).

Similarly, our own communication can inadvertently limit *our* own freedom or show we rely too much on others, thereby **threatening our own negative face**. This occurs if we:

- Express too much thanks or apologies, making us seem indebted.

- Accept offers, thanks, or apologies, which might create an obligation.

Check your understanding of Face by taking the following quiz.

Your colleague makes a small mistake in a team meeting. You correct them sharply in front of everyone, saying, "No, that's completely wrong. You messed up." Which type of face are you primarily threatening, and whose face is it?

Your own positive face

Your colleague's positive face

✖ Your colleague's negative face

> **Incorrect.** Negative face relates to freedom and independence, not being publicly criticised or put down.

Your own negative face

⭐ 0/1   👁 Show solution   ⟳ Retry

2. As the project lead, you send an email to a busy manager with the subject line: "URGENT: Do this now!" and the body states, "I need you to approve this document by 3 PM today, no excuses." Which type of face are you primarily threatening, and whose face is it?

○ Your own positive face

○ Your own negative face

○ The manager's positive face

○ The manager's negative face

✔ Check

3. You are presenting a new idea to your team, but you keep saying phrases like "I'm so sorry, this might be a silly idea," or "Please forgive me if this sounds stupid." Which type of face are you primarily threatening?

✖ Your own negative face

> **Incorrect.** Your negative face relates to your freedom to act; your apologies are about your perceived competence, not your independence.

Your own positive face

Your team's positive face

Your team's negative face

⭐ 0/1   👁 Show solution   ⟳ Retry

1. Be polite (click each question to read more)

⌄ Why?

Being polite helps you avoid "threatening" someone's self-esteem (positive face) or freedom to act (negative face). It shows respect and helps build good relationships.

› When to be more polite?

› Key takeaway?

Now take this short quiz to check your understanding.

1. You need to ask a very senior manager you rarely speak to for a significant favour. What level of politeness is best? 🔊

Low

High

Medium

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Stop being too nice

2. But don't be overly polite!

˅ Why?

Sometimes, being *too* polite can be a problem. It might make you seem fake, insincere, or even like you're trying to trick someone. In emergencies, for example, we might need to yell at someone to get out of harm's way, or to protect ourselves. But even in normal business contexts, excessive politeness can be a problem.

˅ Bad example

"We are extremely distressed to learn that an error was made pertaining to your order. We offer our humblest apologies for the unnecessary inconvenience that you have been caused."

- *Why it's bad:* This sounds forced or over-the-top, making it seem less genuine.

˅ Good example

"We are sorry for the error with your order and for any trouble it caused."

- *Why it's good:* This is clear, sincere, and directly apologises without using overly complex or dramatic words.

˅ What impacts politeness?

- **Culture:** For example, in Australia, politeness often means being welcoming and showing friendliness.
- **Gender:** Expectations can differ; for instance, a woman not smiling might be seen as "rude," while a man might be seen as "serious."

3. Lead with — and focus on — the positive

Place good news at the start of letters and emails before you give bad news

˅ Why?

When writing letters or emails, it's usually best to begin with the good news. This shows respect for the reader and creates a friendly tone right away. For example:

I am delighted to inform you that your application has been successful.

When giving bad news, it's common to delay it and include a "buffer" first. This helps soften the message and protect the reader's feelings (called "saving face"). For example:

Thank you for your application for the internship at BrightPath Consulting. We received many strong applications. Unfortunately, your application was not successful at this time.

Also, try to use language that highlights the positive side or shows that you're still trying to help. For example:

- *problem → (working on a) solution*
- *complaint → (aiming to meet your) satisfaction*
- *reject → (unable to) approve*

This kind of positive wording shows care and professionalism — and helps maintain good relationships, even when the message is disappointing.

4. Use personal language for good news and empathy

⌄ Why?

Using personal pronouns like **"I"** and **"you"** helps build a connection with the reader and shows empathy. This is especially important when giving good news or responding to concerns.

⌄ How?

Use "I" and "you" when sharing good news: *I am delighted to offer you the position of Summer Research Scholar.*

Use "I" and "you" to show care and understanding: *Thank you for your message. I'm sorry to hear about the issues with your recent purchase.*

⌄ Avoid...

Avoid using "you" in a way that sounds like blame when discussing problems: *Your complaint about your washing machine that you bought from us last year has been passed to me…*

Instead, reword to sound more neutral and supportive: *The issue with the washing machine has been passed to me, and I'll look into it as soon as possible.*

This helps maintain a polite and professional tone while protecting your reader's "face."

⌄ Key takeaway?

Use "I" and "you" to build connection and show empathy, but be careful not to sound like you're blaming the reader when discussing problems. Keep your tone personal, polite, and supportive.

Now take this short quiz to check your understanding. (NEEDS UPDATING!!)

5. Impersonalise bad news (= don't make it personal)

⌄ Why?

When delivering bad news, it's common in business writing to avoid personal pronouns like **"I," "we,"** or **"you."** This helps keep the tone neutral and professional—and avoids blaming either the writer or the reader.

∨ How?

1. Start with "It is..." to shift focus away from people

❌ *I have denied your request.*
✅ *It is with regret that your request cannot be accommodated.*

2. Talk about the rules or process, not the person

❌ *You are not allowed to appeal.*
✅ *The application process does not allow appeals.*

3. Use passive voice to keep the focus on what happened, not who caused it.

❌ *We did not approve your application.*
✅ *Your application was not approved.*

∨ Key takeaway?

When sharing bad news, use neutral language that focuses on the situation, not the people involved.

5. Soften requests

∨ Why?

When you ask someone to do something, it's polite to **soften** your language. This helps reduce pressure and makes your message sound more respectful. Words that soften requests include: *perhaps, maybe, could, would, might.*

∨ How?

You can reduce the amount of (face-threatening) pressure you put on your readers by hedging requests. For example:

○ *Perhaps we could arrange a meeting to discuss this.*

○ *Would you be able to send the report by Friday?*

∨ Who and When?

This kind of language is useful when asking colleagues, clients, or anyone in a position where a direct request might sound too strong.

However, in business contexts, **you don't need to soften** your language when you're...

○ **Offering help to a customer:** *We'll be happy to repair the machine for you.* (This is a helpful offer, not a request.)

○ **Stating a company policy or fact:** *I'm sorry, but charges will apply for any repairs.* (This is clear information, not something the reader can choose to do so there is no room for negotiation.)

∨ Key takeaway?

Soften requests to sound more polite and respectful, but be clear and direct when offering help or stating company policies.

Is the tone of the sentence in the box appropriate for business communication? Why or why not? Then read each statement and decide if they are true or not.

> *It is my sincere and most humble pleasure to receive your timely, generous and kind invitation to attend the illustrious event at your most esteemed university.*

Click **T** (True) or **F** (False). You can also click the ⓘ icon for more information.

1. **T** or **F** ? The sentence uses too many emotional and polite expressions that weaken its clarity. ⓘ

2. **T** or **F** ? The phrase *"illustrious event at your most esteemed university"* clearly explains what the event is. ⓘ

3. **T** or **F** ? Using expressions like *"kind invitation"* and *"generous"* [is] professional.

   Explanation: This phrase sounds formal but is too vague. It doesn't name the event, so the message is unclear. ⊗

4. **T** or **F** ? Reducing emotional language and adjectives improves unclear.

✓ Check

Is the tone of the sentence in the box appropriate for a business communication? Why or why not? Then read each statement and decide if they are true or not.

> *We are extremely distressed to learn that a profound and unfortunate error occurred in your interaction with our company.*

Click **T** (True) or **F** (False). You can also click the ⓘ icon for more information.

1. **T** or **F** ? The phrase "extremely distressed" is appropriate for a professional apology. ⓘ

2. **T** or **F** ? It's important to match your tone to the seriousness of what actually happened. ⓘ

3. **T** or **F** ? It's a good idea to avoid words like *"we"* or *"I"* in an apology because it's too personal. ⓘ

4. **T** or **F** ? Good formal writing should avoid describing emotions and instead focus on facts and actions. ⓘ

✓ Check